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SUBJECT: FM-NOMINEE UNPLUGGED: BLUNT-TALKING KASIT PIROMYA,  
THAILAND'S NEXT FOREIGN MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and Comment: In private discussions and public fora in recent days, Thailand's Foreign Minister designate Kasit Piromya has displayed both a grasp of foreign policy challenges facing Thailand and the outspoken views in defense of the People's Alliance Democracy (PAD) that show the promise and peril he brings to the foreign policy portfolio for the Abhisit administration. A career diplomat and former Ambassador to the U.S., Kasit knows that he inherits a demoralized, essentially inert Ministry that needs reinvigorated leadership. Drawing on the Democrat Party foreign policy philosophy that Thailand is a democratic country and its foreign policy should reflect that, Kasit suggests he will attempt to boost Thailand's nearly invisible presence at key UN missions and induce changes in Thai policy towards Burma as well as towards its restive south. However, Kasit's unapologetic and at times emotional defense of PAD actions, including the late November airport seizures, is already bringing criticism from Thais and foreigners alike, and could prove a continuing sore for the Democrat Party, which never distanced itself from the most extreme tactics employed by the PAD in their efforts against Thaksin-affiliated governments. Kasit won the foreign ministry portfolio in part because Democrat leaders saw fellow party contender Kraisaak Choonhavan as too much of a loose cannon; they may not have appreciated how close Kraisaak and Kasit are in style, if not substance. End Summary and Comment.

Taking over a demoralized ministry  
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12. (C) The Thai foreign service once prided itself in having senior diplomats willing to speak their minds and challenge Thai foreign policy, at least within the halls of the foreign ministry, blunt talkers like Kasit Piromya. That tradition has largely disappeared in the past eight years, particularly under the stifling leadership of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra's overbearing first Foreign Minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, who prized loyalty and willingness to carry out directions from above and stifled dissenting voices with downgraded assignments. Nearly all of the straight talkers are gone, having reached the mandatory retirement age of 60.

13. (C) Kasit told us in a private conversation December 8 that he knew he would be taking over a demoralized ministry long lacking in leadership, and that restoring previous standards would be an uphill battle. One of his first goals,

apart from ensuring Thailand moved quickly to host rescheduled ASEAN summits successfully, would be to restore Thailand's international voice. He scornfully assessed what he called the "invisible" Thai diplomatic presence at UN organizations in Geneva and New York, including the lack of speeches or involvement on important issues. He suggested he would attempt to make an early trip to both locales and expressed willingness to re-examine the recent Thai tradition, imposed by Surakiart in 2001, of abstaining on all country-specific human rights resolutions and supporting no action motions.

¶4. (C) Another early priority would be to attempt to restore Thailand's image after the months of recent turmoil culminating in the airport takeover. Reflecting advice heard from APCO Associates, which has pitched an image-rehab project/contract to the incoming Democrat-led coalition, Kasit suggested the MFA may employ some special envoys, Thais with some political stature, rather than the MFA's current thin bench, to reach out to various parts of the world and manage key relationships/sets of issues, including the U.S.

Thoughts on US-Thai bilateral relations  
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¶5. (C) Kasit left Washington in 2005. Acknowledging the overall drift in recent Thai diplomatic efforts, he told us December 8 that he wanted to promote a restored partnership in which the two sides discussed issues of common interest with both sides showing initiative, rather than Thailand passively waiting and merely reacting to whatever the US

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raised. He said he would review the two Bush-Thaksin joint statements (2003 and 2005, the latter of which he helped draft) to see what made sense to retain as part of the framework for promoting the relationship, and what could be added to carry the relationship forward.

¶6. (C) Kasit confirmed that Thai UN PermRep Don Pramudwinai, long presumed to be the Ambassadorial nominee to Washington, would retain that standing under the incoming administration. In recognition of the damage caused by the long gap between Ambassadors, Kasit grumbled that Don would have to "be very active in outreach" in Washington once the long-awaited Ambassadorial reshuffle occurs. Acknowledging FTA discussions would not be going anywhere, Kasit expressed interest in working on individual economic policy issues of concern, like IPR enforcement.

Foreign policy should reflect Thailand is a democracy  
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¶7. (SBU) Both privately and publicly at a December 19 forum held at Chulalongkorn University, Kasit stressed the Democrat Party mantra that Thailand's foreign policy should reflect that Thailand is a democratic society. Kasit asserted that policy on issues like Burma, Burmese refugees, and southern unrest should be politically led, not determined by bureaucratic actors and processes driven out of the Ministry of Interior or the National Security Council. Privately, Kasit vowed to take a close look at refugee policy, and how Thailand could more effectively address emerging cross-border, transnational issues like migration with international partners.

¶8. (U) On ASEAN, Kasit hailed the ASEAN Charter coming into force December 15, but stressed that all 10 members must now open up governance to more scrutiny and transparency for civil society. As ASEAN Chair for 2009, he vowed Thailand would push other members to meet the promise inherent in the Charter, as well as the establishment of an ASEAN human rights body. Thailand would work closely with Indonesia, given its dramatic democratic changes in recent years and its traditional leading role in ASEAN.

¶9. (SBU) On Burma--and using the word "Burma," not "Myanmar"--Kasit vowed privately and publicly that "we would not have the same style of policy as under Thaksin and Samak. Personal business interests of leading political figures and family members will have no place in our foreign policy." Thailand would not jeopardize Burmese communities by the dam and electricity line projects proposed by previous governments, he vowed, and Thailand would not be blackmailed by Burma simply because one pipeline (Yadana gas) provided five percent of Thailand's energy needs. While Thai officials would speak to the Burmese junta in a civilized manner, ASEAN needed to move forward, he stated.

¶10. (SBU) On the South, Kasit asserted that Bangkok needed to be more focused on fostering reconciliation via a political approach that did not rely on "security forces, tanks, and killing." If the UK had a Minister for Northern Ireland and Japan a Minister for Okinawa issues, perhaps it was time for Thailand to have a Minister for the South, he stated publicly; privately, he indicated former Democrat PM and party elder Chuan Leekpai was likely to assume this responsibility. Kasit said that the Democrats would reach out to both the Indonesians and Malaysians to help facilitate discussions and a process that could lead to reconciliation.

PAD roots die hard - major liability?  
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¶11. (C) Kasit's major liability, however, is his affiliation with the PAD movement which occupied Government House on August 26 and took over Bangkok's airports November 25 for eight days. While not a PAD leader, Kasit was a frequent speaker on stage and in the international media explaining and defending PAD actions. A Democrat party staffer told us December 19 that Chuan took Kasit into the party "freezer," a room in which wayward officials are lectured, on December 18 to caution him to tone down his rhetoric in advance of

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becoming the FM nominee. Kasit essentially ignored the caution at the Chula forum, emotionally and at times defiantly responding to skeptical questioning of his defense of PAD actions by Thai and international media representatives.

¶12. (SBU) Asked to defend his statements in support of the PAD airport takeover by the BBC correspondent, Kasit acknowledged Thailand might never be a Scandinavian-style "perfect" democracy, but asserted unapologetically that "my conscience is clear; the actions represented the rise of civil society, and the furthering of the democratic process." After 70 years of the military and big business calling the shots and determining who held power in Thailand, civil society had found its voice. What was threatening when housewives and NGO activists found their voice, demanded that politics be clean and accountable, and influenced the process, he asked rhetorically. The recent change of government came "peacefully, within parliament, by the vote of elected representatives of the people, not by tanks in the streets." He challenged European journalists to compare the level of violence in Bangkok with that in Greece, "the cradle of western civilization and an EU member."

¶13. (C) Note: After the seminar concluded, the organizer, Professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak, called us to confirm whether Kasit's nomination was indeed set; he feared Kasit's outbursts at the seminar might be enough to sink his candidacy, and that the seminar organizers might be blamed. Later in the afternoon, the French embassy contacted us suggesting that the diplomatic community should consider boycotting the first public appearance Kasit might make if he were confirmed as Foreign Minister, to protest his defense of PAD actions. Similar reasoning led many embassies not to attend the King's Birthday Parade December 2. We believe such gestures are unwise, and we will not join any such efforts. But such talk, combined with Kasit's blunt

personality, are indications that his expected tenure at the MFA could well be a stormy one.  
JOHN